CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"WRITING IS A COMPULSION": IN CONVERSATION WITH BILLY O'CALLAGHAN[1]

MARISOL MORALES-LADRÓN

Billy O'Callaghan was born in Cork in 1974. He is the author of three short story collections: *In Exile* (Mercier Press, 2008), *In Too Deep* (Mercier Press, 2009) and *The Things We Lose, The Things We Leave Behind* (New Island Press, 2013). He has contributed with fiction writing and critical commentary to a wide range of newspapers, including the *Irish Examiner,* the *Evening Echo* and the *Irish Times*. A lover of the short story form, as he has often described himself, he has made his way into the publishing world with more than eighty of his narratives appearing in literary journals and magazines all over the world. Many of these have been shortlisted and awarded with distinguished prizes, such as the George A. Birmingham Award, the Lunch Hour Stories Prize, the Molly Keane Creative Writing Award, the Seán Ó Faoláin Award, the RTE Radio 1 Francis MacManus Award, the Faulkner/Wisdom Award, the Glimmer Train Prize, the Writing Spirit Award, and the prestigious Bord Gáis Energy Irish book Award, in the category of "writing.ie, Short Story of the Year", for the story that gives title to his most recent collection.

Billy O'Callaghan's writing is a gift to the ears as it perfectly encompasses that unfeasible fusion of prose and poetry. His mastery at conveying emotions through the right choice of words, often to expose a painful and unpleasant reality, reveals how he carefully crafts his stories using a language that is both evocative and unswerving. In between tradition and modernity, with both gloomy and uplifting endings–when there are such closures–, the author tends to focus on day-to-day human concerns, including dramas and miseries, with which to expose characters to the most extreme of circumstances. In May 2014, he was invited as a guest writer to the XIII International Conference of AEDEI, during which

the following interview was conducted, both in public and privately. I would like to thank Billy O'Callaghan for his kindness in collaborating to scheme and complete the present written version through the e-mail.

Q.: I have read somewhere that you both read and write short stories everyday. Is that an activity you keep doing in search for inspiration? Why is the short story the literary genre you feel more attached to?

A.: A few years ago, I started to become active on Facebook. But I don't live a particularly interesting life, and very little of note actually happens to me on a daily basis. Wanting something to post about with some regularity, I decided to put up a short summary of whatever story I'd just finished reading. It quickly became part of my daily routine, though it has evolved to the point where I only choose stories now that have a free link available online–so that everyone can read them. And it's been great for me, because it has forced me to really think about the stories I read, and to cast my nets widely in terms of the sort of stories and writers I choose. I am especially partial to stories in translation, because it opens up large parts of the world that usually go unrepresented with western readers. I also like to find stories of writers whose reputations, for whatever reason, have faded with time.

I've always been a voracious reader; I also read a lot of novels, non-fiction and, especially, poetry, but when it comes to writing, short stories feel, to me, the most natural form. I grew up listening to my grandmother telling stories, and maybe it was something about the shape of them, and how complete they seemed in their brevity that makes the short story on the page resonate with me. I like reading short stories for the same reasons I like writing them: they can contain entire lives in just a few pages, and they tend to favour concision and, especially, allusion. Several years ago, when I'd first begun to think about writing in a serious way, I read Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*, and there was a passage in which he explained his Iceberg Theory: "If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water".[2]

I really connected with the idea that, in a good short story, you often only see a fraction of the whole, with the rest implied, and that the story is all the better for it. But it is far easier said than done, and it's only in the last couple of years that I feel as if I am starting to get even close to

achieving what I want with my stories. It's also true that I write every day. I have to, because I write very slowly, and the discipline is essential if I am to get anything done. I am a morning person and like to write early, so I'm at my desk by 7 a.m., and I write through until around noon. The afternoons are for other things, such as reading and book review work, but I'll usually find an hour or two in the evenings to go back through what I've written that day, just so that I can really have the feel of the story inside me. Put down like this, it sounds like I should be producing a lot, but the truth is that my process is usually a mess. I am disciplined when it comes to time served, but in no other way. And I seem to live in constant rewrite mode. I wasn't always this way, but as a condition it's getting worse. Usually, I find it difficult to go on until the sentences I've written feel right, but every step forward has an impact on what's already been put down.

Q.: Some of your stories are set in Ireland, North and South of the border, in clearly identifiable places, while others are placed in foreign lands–like "The Matador"–, and yet an alternative group is formed by those that belong to a timeless and spaceless realm. Considering that your first collection, *In Exile*, precisely revolves around the importance of landscapes, sceneries and backgrounds, how significant are sites for you? Would you identify with writers who intend to fix particular human emotions to specific places or are you rather inclined to grasp the universal quality of such emotions?

A.: Landscape and setting are extremely important to me. When writing, I value atmosphere highly, because it gives the story a mood that can linger with the reader long after facts of the plot or details of the characters have faded. And setting definitely feeds into the atmosphere. A strong sense of place becomes a kind of a character in itself. I strive at all times to achieve a sense of reality. My ambition, always, is to make the reader believe that what they've just read is true. And generally, the ones that have come closest to succeeding–by which I mean, the ones that feel most fully formed–have been the stories with an extremely strong sense of place.

In my most recent collection, the settings were varied. Some of the stories play out at home, others in places as far-flung from me as New York's Coney Island, Seville and Taiwan. But these were all places I'd visited and which had left deep impressions on me. I love to travel, and find that it really ignites my imagination, maybe because it can feed an exiled mindset, and it seems to lift me to a heightened level of awareness.

When I travel, I tend to feel stories nearby, and because everything is new to me, I find myself looking closely and really trying to absorb the details and atmosphere of where I am. Yet at the same time, the places I use in my stories are often as much imagined as real. It has to do with perception, I think. Years ago, I read Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poetry collection, *A Coney Island of the Mind*, and that phrase, even more than the work itself, has always stayed with me and inspired me in my writing. Our minds build their own reality, I suppose.

With regard to the second part of your question, I am probably more inclined towards attaching particular traits and characteristics to specific places, though I concede that there are undoubtedly universal emotions. I just like the idea of my characters belonging to their world. This feels true for some stories more than others. My island stories are a good example of this, and in particular the title story of the last collection. I write a lot about exile, and I love to write about islands because of their obvious metaphorical value in terms of isolation, disconnection and the idea of a confined existence. But at the same time, I want to make the characters seem very much of the place, not only shackled to it but belonging to it. Shaped and maybe even defined by it. Such circumstances heighten the sense of exile, because losing the place where you belong, and to which you feel generations-bound, means losing a part of yourself. Without the familiarity of that dirt beneath your feet, you'll feel rudderless.

Q.: Connecting to the title of your first collection and, as you have just admitted, exile figures prominently in your work, either literal or metaphorical. Why are there so many characters that are isolated, exiled from everyone else, unable to share their innermost feelings and emotions?

A.: I suppose this question gets right to the heart of my writing. I write about the things that concern me, but I think I also write to try and make some sense of my place in the world, and to understand how the world really is. In my last collection, *The Things We Lose*, none of the stories can be classed as strictly autobiographical, though some of them are definitely informed by, or allude to, certain events or periods in my life. I see reflections of myself in several of the stories, though the details are masked in fiction, and even people who know me well will probably find it difficult to make the connections.

I have a sociable side, but I generally have to force this part of myself to the surface, and the truth is that I am one of those who can be alone in a crowded room. I like people–some more than others–but I am most

comfortable, I think, with solitude. And a lot of the stories I write are contemplations of this, my attempts at expressing this sense of separation, and at trying to understand my need for it. John Donne wrote, "No man is an island entire of itself; every man / is a piece of the continent, a part of the main".[3] My stories, the best ones I've written, attempt to challenge this view, because I have known a different world.

Also, I suppose a lot has to do with observance. Growing up, I spent a long time with older generations, and what I remember is a lot of stillness and silence. People, at least of my background, and men especially, didn't talk very much about their feelings. Communication kept itself to nods and half-sentences, and there was a general acceptance of their lot. But observing this, even from a young age, I had the sense of internal storms. And it fascinated me.

Q.: In terms of subject matter, do you consciously choose the issues that you will explore in your writings or do you let them emerge in a kind of inadvertent way?

A.: Stories generally emerge from the things I've been thinking about for a long time. Once they begin to take some shape, and I can see them in my mind, I know that I can start. The writing is my way of making sense to myself of the things that concern me, and maybe, through that, getting a better sense of myself. To find out, as one of the characters put it in Saul Bellow's late novella, *The Theft*, "who it is that's at the middle of me". Sometimes the stories are triggered by things that happen to me or to others around me; sometimes they take shape simply from thinking about life, about the past and about what the future might hold. Regrets and mistakes are the things that people tend to dwell on, I suppose, and these are often good fodder for stories. Writing helps to make sense of them.

I like to write with a theme or themes in mind, though it's more organic a process than this makes it sound, because the sense of the theme will often be vague, more of a feeling than anything else, and usually it will take several drafts before I have a full grasp of what I'm writing about. Part of the reason why they take a long time to write is because I have to wait for them to reveal themselves to me, and to decide on their own direction. There's a lot of trial and error, and a lot of wrong roads followed, but that's what it takes. This isn't ideal, because it's not easy to really get inside a story, but it's the only way I know how to do it, and when it all comes together it's very satisfying.

Q.: Even though the stories comprised in your last collection, *The Things We Lose, The Things We Leave Behind*, are varied in style, subject matter, length and setting, they all seem to revolve around the idea of death, grief or loss, with characters facing miscarriage, divorce or even cancer. All narratives seem to converge on the need to make sense of, and to find meaning, in the aftermath of a tragic or painful event. What is your underlying motif? Are you interested in exploring how human beings cope with adversity, with the challenge of a new fresh start or with the search for resources or resilient capabilities characters did not even know they had?

A.: I don't really think in terms of a single underlying motif. I am interested in how people cope in the face of terrible and traumatic situations, how they find the strength to go on, and just how much of themselves they lose in the process. In life, and I hope in my stories, the past haunts the present, and compromise always comes at some cost. But maybe that's the price of survival. I am also fascinated by the mechanics of how people interact, how and why relationships are held together and how and why they break apart. Are we all in some way connected, or are we each our own little world, only really noticing one another in our moments of collision? We're all driven by our emotions, but how much of this keeps to a surface level and how much goes deeper is really anyone's guess. We turn on the television, see horrific and heart-wrenching images from some third world famine or civil war, and find ourselves moved to tears. But an hour or a day later it'll have been forgotten, or lessened, because it doesn't truly impact on our lives. What does that say about us?

Writing stories is my way–the only way I know how–of addressing and trying to make sense of the things that concern me and which feel like the big issues in my life, either directly or indirectly. The previous collections, *In Exile* and *In Too Deep*, were held together by certain themes but were probably more eclectic. In both cases, I'd written the stories over a particular period of time and then selected the ones that felt most suited for inclusion when I got the chance to compile a book. But *The Things We Lose* had a different genesis, because from quite early on in the process I knew I was writing a collection. In September 2011, I was contacted by Eoin Purcell, who'd just been appointed Commissioning Editor at New Island. Eoin had been the editor at Mercier Press during the publication of my earlier collections, and was eager to do something with me again. And what he wanted was a collection of short stories.

Neither *In Exile* nor *In Too Deep* had gained much in the way of either sales or critical attention, and I'd believed the chance of another collection had passed me by, so I was stunned and thrilled by his interest. At that point, I had, I think, five of the stories written, and another couple at an early draft stage. I showed him the finished stories, talked up the ones that needed finishing and bought a bit of time on the assurance that I just needed to do a little polishing. Eoin liked what he saw, and though there was not an initial offer, I set to work on some new stories. I asked for a couple of months, which turned into about a year and a half, and the collection came together. But it differed from the previous books because, this time, I knew I was writing a collection.

The key for me was the title story. It was one of the first stories I'd written, in late 2009, and as soon as it was done I knew I'd written something that I'd always wanted to write. It just felt bigger than what was on the page, and I knew the world of the story inside out, I knew the characters in an entirely new way. So it set the bar at a new height for me in terms of moving forward. It also gave me a new understanding of what I could do with a story. Of course, as usual, I couldn't let it alone, and it's only now that it's actually in the book, that I resist the urge to rewrite it, though there are still some words I'd like to change and sentences I'd like to reshape.

Most importantly, though, getting that story done clarified the things that really concerned me. The next few stories I wrote, in the two years prior to Eoin Purcell getting in touch, all seemed to fit together in some way, either thematically, or by mood. And once I'd heard from Eoin, and really started to think in terms of a cohesive book, knowing my direction really helped enormously when it came to writing the remaining stories. The last few stories I finished for the book were "Lila" and "Farmed Out", both of which took a very long time to write, and "Keep Well To Seaward", the collection's longest story, which was written in a ten-week burst a few months after I'd already submitted the final manuscript. I was able to write these stories, all of which were full of challenges to me, because by then my vision for the book, how I wanted it to be, was so clear–to the point of overwhelming, really–in my mind.

Q.: A fascinating concern in many of your stories, especially in your last collection, is the idea of time. There are many passages in which characters reflect on the passage of time, on how it changes our perception of reality and how we are changed through time, while space seems to retain our memories. Are you attracted by the fluidity of time or is it rather memory the focus of your attention?

A.: In the last collection, the themes of loss and regret were very much to the fore, which to me naturally encourages reflection and meditation on

the passage of time. And I think memory and time are inextricably tied. We see a photograph of ourselves as children and it transports us. I think the past is all around us, close enough always to touch, and all it takes to access it is to be able to recognise its texture. And our best days and our worst make for the most vivid memories of all. In this regard, time is very much a concept, as is reality. Being something of a history buff, I have a deep affinity for ancient places, especially standing stones and stone circles, which litter the rural Irish landscape. Their sense of mystery, just the sheer age of them and the implication of what they are, what they stand for and how they came to be, captivates me, as does the realisation that I can walk where people walked so many thousands of years earlier. Once you open yourself to thoughts of that magnitude, it's like contemplating the scale of the universe. It's hard not to be awed.

I live a very internalised life, with not much happening in my world on a day-to-day basis, and I spend a lot of time alone, thinking, reading and writing. So I'm never very far removed from the past. The fluidity of time interests me greatly, and is something I think about a lot. It's a kind of magic, and it's very interesting to try and make sense of it in writing. The past looms large within the present in a number of my stories. It shadows everything, and the lives being lived have to deal with the consequences of all that has gone before. Again, this seems to be especially true of the stories with the strongest sense of place, particularly the island stories. In these, there's also a natural contrast when it comes to Time as it pertains to landscape and to its inhabitants; the essentially eternal quality of the land plays off against the fleeting nature of its people, even those generations connected to the place. There's something pagan about that, I think, the notion of time and timelessness, the natural and the spiritual.

Q.: A salient feature of your short stories is the titles you have chosen for them. I have found that although some of them are quite descriptive, others are suggestively obscure, whose meaning can only be tackled at the very end. This is the case of "Icebergs", for instance. There are yet others, like "Zhuangzi Dreamed he was a Butterfly", whose meaning remains cryptic even after its reading. How important are titles for you?

A.: Titles matter a great deal. I'm not sure I've always thought so, but certainly when I was writing the stories for *The Things We Lose* I gave a lot of thought and consideration to them. Many of the stories began life under different titles. "Zhuangzi Dreamed he was a Butterfly", for example, was originally called "A Concept of Reality" and I think also, at

one point, "The Illusion of Reality". This, essentially, is what the story is about, questioning the line between what is real and what is not, as a way of coming to terms with grief. But both titles felt clichéd and unimaginative, uninspiring. And then, at some point, I was reading a book on Chinese philosophy and came across the story of Zhuangzi–the name seems to suffer a number of spelling variations, but I favour this one for the way it looks when written down; the "z" just appeals to me–, who fell asleep and had a strange dream. When he woke up, he couldn't decide if he'd been a man dreaming he was a butterfly, or if he was actually a butterfly now dreaming that he was a man. This seemed to speak right to the heart of my own story. The butterfly seemed symbolic of childhood, beauty, summertime and the brevity of life; the notion questioned what was real and what was not, and the title itself seemed unusual, interesting in terms of its rhythm and resonance, and thought-provoking.

Generally, I like a title to challenge and encourage a little bit of contemplation, the way a line of poetry does, and I like the cryptic element because it can add yet another level to the story. I also like it to have some sense of music about it. Sometimes, the title will be a veiled reference to something in the story; sometimes it will have secondary meanings. There's a story in the collection called "Are the Stars Out Tonight?", which tells of a couple who've come to the bring of divorce, and they are sitting together in the garden on a night in late summer, drinking beer and looking at the sky, discussing their situation and leaving a lot of things unsaid. The title fits nicely with the scene, but also happens to be the opening line from the song by the Flamingos, "I Only Have Eyes For You". It's not essential that the reader knows this, but knowing it adds something because it's the unsaid thing and can't help but reveal something of the main character. Always, I write purely for myself. Once the story is written I certainly want it to have a life of its own, but while I am actually writing I never imagine anyone else reading it. I rarely have any confidence in what I write, and my stories are always bad until they turn a corner in some rewrite and become bearable. So, I am striving constantly to please only myself. And this could be why the titles do at times become quite cryptic.

Another story, "Keep Well To Seaward", probably has an even more obscure title. The main character is a young Irish writer who settles in Taipei, at a time when the threat of invasion by China seems very real, and falls in love with a local woman. The title is a line from the *Odyssey*. Odysseus and his crew are sailing by the island of the sirens, and the goddess Circe appears on board and warns him of the danger. The sirens use their songs to lure sailors onto the rocks. She advises that if he is

determined to hear it, he should plug his crew's ears with beeswax and have himself tied to the mast. And the direction? "Steer wide, keep well to seaward". Again, it has been suggested to me that few readers will pick up on the reference, but I don't think it's so obscure. The main character in the story is on his own Odyssey, and Circe's warning is good life-advice. The story–and, indeed, all the stories in the collection–can be read and understood without deep analysis, but I need to write the story that is inside me, without concern as to how it will be received. The fact is that every story presents a different challenge.

The title story is a case in point. I wrote that story quite early on, and once I knew that I was working on a collection, it was clear to me that I wanted this as my title because it was the one that seemed to unite all the others and to clarify everything in my mind. Thematically, the whole collection could be distilled down to that one title, because that's what the stories are essentially all about, the tragedies and regrets that mar our pasts. Of course, everyone, including the publishers, thought it was too long, but I refused to compromise. I was in love with the sing-song aspect of it, and the way it seemed to hold its own balance. As soon as I thought of it, it just seemed right. Since the book's release, people have asked me if the title was influenced by Raymond Carver's long titles–*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* or *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*–or by Tim O'Brien's *The Things We Carried*, and the truth is, I don't know. It's possible, because I've read those books, and loved them, but they certainly weren't a conscious influence.

Q.: Many of your stories end inconclusively, leaving the narrative suspended in the air. Why is that? Is this somehow connected to the weight of silence in many of the plots?

A.: I like short stories that give you a glimpse into people's lives. You meet them at a certain point, and if the characters feel real enough, you might be able to accept that they've had not only a past but also that they'll go on from this point, even if you're not there to watch. The stories I write often feel–at least for me–haunted and even weighed down by their own pasts, but the focus is usually on some critical life-moment, a breaking point. And if, at the end of a story, there is anyone left standing, what else is there for them to do but to go on? The open-ended aspect of several of the stories has to do with the characters' eventual acceptance of their lot. Usually it comes with the realisation that they have no choice but to endure whatever has befallen them, whether it is divorce, miscarriage, a death in the family, or love gone wrong. The best they can do is try to pick

up the pieces and keep going. Life, I suppose, tends to play out in this fashion, and I wanted the stories to reflect that.

Silence is a real part of the world of my stories, and of my life, so I suppose it is natural that it will have some bearing on the stories' endings. It has to do with the voids that lie between people. In my experience, in the world in which I've grown up, people rarely discuss their problems openly. Silence, or avoidance, is a survival mechanism for many who have been exposed to a life of loss or trauma, because denial, even to ourselves, is often a more tolerable option than the shame of confession or acknowledgement. Repression doesn't make for a healed life, but we are all shaped to a certain degree by our surround, our background and our circumstances. And if we breathe hard as we run away, at least we get to go on breathing.

Q.: Although gender issues do not to figure prominently in your stories, you pay attention to how differently men and women deal with emotional and painful circumstances, like grieving, breaking up or parting. The resulting contrast in their reactions is often clearly and openly stated in the narratives. Do you have an agenda on this subject?

A.: No, I have no agenda. My only objective is to represent the characters as realistically as possible within the framework of the story, based on the world as I have known it to be. As people, we're products of our pasts and our surroundings, and I try to observe these things closely when I meet people. It's essential to me that the characters fit the story, and unless the story is trying to be contradictory, it generally means that the characters will fit the gender roles dictated by their society. In a lot of my stories–some would say my better ones–, the characters seem to hold the combined weight of their heritage, their culture, their background and their social circumstances, and they behave and react accordingly. For them to react in some contrary way, unless it is for a specific reason, would threaten the story's credibility.

I often discuss with my father the shifts that have taken place in Irish society within two or three generations, particularly in rural and village communities. My father grew up in considerable poverty, the fourth of sixteen children in a two-bedroomed house, and he often talks about what that life was like and the things that mattered then. In that world, men and women fulfilled different but clearly defined roles, things that would not be tolerated today, were accepted as normal and children were treated very differently. That's a world that existed in the fifties and early sixties, and

maybe even into the seventies. In rural areas, and on the islands, such mindsets were slow in shifting. Even if it doesn't directly apply to what I happen to be writing about, I try to keep a sense of that brutal reality in mind. The world of the story has an enormous bearing on its characters. My task is to depict those characters as truly as possible, without judgement on my part. And when I get really lucky, when I reach a point in my drafting where the story becomes clear to me, I find that the characters' actions and reactions start to feel inevitable, natural. I can hope for nothing more than that.

Q.: Last May 18, I read a thought-provoking article in *The Telegraph*, entitled "The irresistible rise of the short story". Sam Baker very convincingly argued there that the short story was the perfect literary form for the present century thanks to technology, because it suited "our attention spans and our mobile devices" (2014). This is most interesting as short-story writers usually feel that that they have chosen a less profitable genre and have to face publishers who are more interested in novels, which sell better. How do you feel about this? How do you see the evolution and rise of this literary genre, considering that the habit of readers is being influenced and altered as a result of a faster and more consumerist society?

A.: It should be true that the short story is the perfect literary form for today's busy, attention-deficit-disordered world. But I'm not sure. Because wouldn't it then be even more true for poetry? Yet week after week, the best-sellers lists remain crammed with knock-off versions of *Fifty Shades of Grey* or *The Da Vinci Code*, the latest celebrity "autobiography", and the teams of writers who churn out books in James Patterson's name. A while back, I came across a list of the top ten best-selling fiction titles in the United States, year by year, for the entire 20th century. It was interesting to me that for the first three quarters of the century the parade of names appearing again and again included the likes of Edith Wharton, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Nabokov, John Marquand, Henry Miller, William Styron, Daphne du Maurier and Kurt Vonnegut. Whether it's to do with a general dumbing down of society or to the fact that marketing gets to call the shots now, I really can't say, but it's fairly clear that, anomalies apart, that calibre of writer doesn't make the big-selling end-of-year lists any more.

I'm not sure I've seen quite the major upsurge of interest in the short story that's been purported. It's true enough that in the last few years it has gained a bit of ground with regard to media coverage. New awards have

been created, and Alice Munro winning the Nobel Prize did help shine a light on the form, but collections remain something of a limited market. MA programmes in creative writing have become extremely popular, and a lot of the focus tends to fall on the short story, but I don't know if there's been that much of a shift in terms of sales, apart from the big-name writers. It seems that more people are interested in writing them than in reading them, probably because they look easy.

I can see why the form seems ideal for today's hectic existence. It is theoretically possible to read a short story in fifteen minutes or half an hour, and with electronic devices they can be read anywhere. But good short stories are often intense and subtle things, and require concentration and contemplation. Short doesn't mean easy, and this is true not only when it comes to writing them but also to reading them. And I'm not sure that most modern readers are prepared to give a short story all the room it needs. I think the short story probably had its golden age from the early part of the 20th century up until the 1960s. Back then, there was a serious and widespread readership available to the form, and the market for them was vibrant. Following on from the likes of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, a lot of very fine American short story writers emerged at that time, writers of the calibre of Bernard Malamud, John Cheever, Bradbury, Flannery O'Connor, Paul Bowles, Irwin Shaw, to name only a small fraction. Philip Roth first came to prominence with his stories, Salinger and Updike, too.

William Faulkner produced great short stories but he was often disparaging of the form, and claimed that he only wrote them for money in order to sustain himself while he worked on his novels. So that must have been a reality of the time. Nowadays, you'd have to be deluded to get into writing stories with the idea or the intent of making easy money, because that well has long since dried up. It's a buyers' market now, with supply far exceeding demand. Even prestigious literary journals tend to have very low readership figures, and it's often said that the only people buying copies are aspiring writers hoping to get their own work accepted. That strikes me as a dangerous trend, because it does little to entice the general reading populace. And so many writers are desperate to get their work published that journals and magazines can get away with paying a pittance, or even less.

Will Kindle change that? Maybe. But everything is sales-driven now. Beckett's first book, the short story collection *More Kicks Than Pricks*, sold abysmally. I have seen it claimed that the book sold just forty-three copies, and even if this is a number exaggerated to make a point, then it's also pretty clear that the truth wouldn't have been a lot higher. Today, if a first book sold that badly, the likelihood of that writer getting the chance to

publish again would be less than slim. If that had been the situation back then, the reality would be a world without Godot. Of course, few publishers now will take a risk on work like that anyway, so we have to wonder how many Beckett-types fall through the cracks every year.

I try not to worry about these things. I can't control the market, or whether or not there'll be interest in my work. I can only control what I write. Whether the short story is in a golden age or in the doldrums, the form won't die. There'll always be people who'll read short stories and there'll always be people who'll write them. When I start a new story, I work under the assumption that nobody will ever get to read it. This is how I function. With that mindset, I only have myself to please, I have no inhibitions about my subject matter, no limit on how much time I spend trying to get inside a story, and no eye on any market. Of course, once it's finished I'll try to get it published, and I'll send it out into the world and hope for the best, but the main thing for me at this stage in my life is to make sure the work is as good as I can make it. And by continuing to do that, I'll eventually have enough stories for another collection, if I am lucky enough to find a publisher to take it on.

Q.: On the whole, would you be able to establish differences in between your three story collections? Would you describe your writing career in terms of continuity or does each of your publications represent a new stage in your life?

A.: There is a certain continuity with my writing, but I also see a natural growth. My basic goals haven't really shifted from when I first started publishing stories. And the same themes continue to dominate or insinuate my writing. But life happens, we grow as people, we travel, we meet people, we fall in and out of love, we experience fresh joys and suffer new pain. From book to book, I am bound to have changed as a person, my attitudes, beliefs and priorities will inevitably have shifted. But my dedication to writing has increased rather than lessened, and I feel that I am getting better with every passing year at what I do, and so I want each book to be better than the last.

The first two collections, *In Exile* and *In Too Deep*, have their moments. I like them a lot for different reasons and I'd cite some of the stories in each book as being among the best I've written. But, all things considered, I am probably most satisfied with the third collection. I worked on the stories of *The Things We Lose* for a long time and with a lot of intensity, and I feel the book is as close as I could get to what I wanted it to be. There's greater consistency in the attention to language, it has a

thematic cohesion that pleases me, and the stories are probably more layered now than they've been in the past. And more than anything else, there's a lot more of myself in these stories than there is in the previous two collections. I've learned to let my guard fall more completely, and how to use the facts of my own life to fuel the fiction, and in that sense, they are probably more truthful in their essence.

I have written–just about–every day for the past fifteen years, and I feel as if I am really only now beginning to hit my stride. I ask more of myself now, but my sense of the story has become more acute, my voice is clearer in my head, I am starting to find my own natural rhythm within my sentences, and I feel more in control of what I am doing. These things have come at a cost, and I think to some degree the stories have probably lost some of the lightness of my past work, but that is necessary to my development. There are stories in the three collections that I wish I could rewrite, or just cut out altogether, and I have a bad habit of rewriting stories even after they've been published. Every time I read them, I find something to change.

I wasn't always so fussy, and some of the stories in my earlier books came quite easily to me–something that would make me almost suspicious, if it happened now–, but I find myself striving, more and more, for perfection, and that brings me far closer to the flesh of the stories than I used to get. Perfection is an impossibility of course, and even real satisfaction will probably always be a long way off for me, but I'll keep pushing myself forward, because writing is a compulsion. If I have to be somewhere, or if, for any reason at all, I am knocked out of my routine, my day will have a hole in it. If I don't get to write, I feel as if a piece of me is missing. Most days it's a hard grind, and there are often days when I'll end up throwing away what I've spent several hours working on, but that's part of it. That's the process. One thing I've learned is to give the stories as much time as they need. For me, they tend to unfurl slowly, but that's okay. I have time.

Q.: Here goes a more clichéd question: which are the writers that have influenced you most? Are they representatives of the Irish tradition or do you tend to look elsewhere for inspiration?

A.: I read extremely widely, and I have great admiration for so many writers, but I suppose my touchstones are the ones who first made me fall in love with books. Books like *Treasure Island*, *The Wind in the Willows* and *Dracula*, as well as the Irish myths and legends, the Brothers Grimm and *A Thousand and One Nights*. By the age of about nine or ten, I'd also

read every western I could get my hands on, Louis L'Amour and Zane Grey, and the Black Horse Westerns, a real pulp series of gaudy, pocket sized hardbacks that filled entire selves of my local library. Around that time, I began devouring books by John Steinbeck, Ray Bradbury and Hemingway, and that, really, was a key period for me. Steinbeck was a great storyteller; his books had such a sense of humanity that it was impossible not to be moved by them; and Bradbury wrote wonderful stories in a language that was just alive on the page with joy. But it was Hemingway who really got under my skin. Something about the stories he wrote resonated, and it was because of reading him that I started to look outward, and to think about other people and places. They were the writers–Hemingway, especially–who most inspired me, and who made me start to think that maybe this was something I could do. They were the ones who set me dreaming.

Stephen King certainly played a part too, because I loved horror in my early teens, as well as Agatha Christie and Georges Simenon. I enjoyed history and for a few years I couldn't get enough of James Michener's hulking, multi-generational novels. Later, probably by my mid teens or so, John Updike, Norman Mailer, and the wonderful Canadian writer, Alistair MacLeod became very important to me. I remember at the age of about fifteen or sixteen finding a copy of his short story collection, *As Birds Bring Forth The Sun*, in my local library, and sitting and spending the entire day reading it, then taking it home and reading it again. And later still, probably as I entered my twenties, I got turned on to writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, V. S. Naipaul, William Golding, Graham Greene, John le Carré. I liked reading Annie Proulx's short stories, and Raymond Carver's, and the novels of people like Anne Tyler and Elmore Leonard. I started to read a lot of writing in translation, too, and so I got to know the work of writers like Yasunari Kawabata, Halldor Laxness Alvaro Mutis, Knut Hamsun, Amos Oz.

And especially in recent years, I've tended to read a lot of poetry, which I find is enormously inspiring to me on a language level. Reading Shakespeare, and the great English Romantic poets, and on up through the likes of Tennyson and Hopkins to Ted Hughes, Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney, has really raised my awareness of language, and what I am doing with my own sentences. And music inspires me, the songwriters who really craft their lyrics with care, people like John Prine, Randy Newman, Kris Kristofferson, Van Morrison, Merle Haggard. And there's Bob Dylan, who's everywhere in my world, one of my constants. I've listened to Dylan every day for probably three quarters of my life, and at this stage he is probably part of the fabric of who I am.

Of the Irish writers, John McGahern might be an influence, because I've always been taken by the beauty and meditative quality of his writing and by the fearless way he had of telling a story. William Trevor, too, though I feel less connected to his work than to McGahern's. I've enjoyed Michael McLaverty's and Liam O'Flaherty's books, over the years. And I've read Joyce's short stories so often that some of their goodness must have been absorbed. But the truth is, I don't think too much about the Irish tradition, because I have my own experiences of it. Over the years, I've immersed myself in its music, I know the landscape and the sea, and I've observed and listened to the people. My writing method is slow and meticulous, but also very instinctive. I never approach anything from a technical standpoint, which might be the reason why I don't write poetry. I judge every sentence purely by feel, and I look for its balance and sense of rhythm. I come from a very ordinary background and have never been to university. All of my learning has been trial and error, and by voraciously reading. As a small child, we lived with my grandmother, my mother's mother, and she'd often keep me at home from school and pass the morning telling me stories of her childhood, and of her father, of the Black and Tans, the Banshee, fairy forts and of her brother's slow death at a young age, after he'd fallen from the back of a goat. Those were the stories that first lit my fire, hearing them at the age of five or six, and I can hear them even now, in my head, being told in her voice. This experience, and listening to the stories my father tells, of growing up in poverty as one of sixteen children in a two-bedroom house, is what influences me, because it has an authenticity and a sense of reality that I crave in my writing.

Q.: Finally, is there a novel down the line? You have explained how long it takes you to write a single story, as you seem to draft a lot before you know the path it will take. Is that the reason why you are less interested in the novel as a literary genre? What other projects do you have in hand? Could you advance something, such as a title or a topic?

As I've already mentioned, I am working on a novel, and have been, on and off, since 2010. I never had an interest in writing a novel until I wrote the story "Goodbye, My Coney Island Baby". I wrote it in late 2009, it was published in a small journal in the United States, and that was it; or should have been. But something peculiar happened. I found it more difficult than usual to move on. Some months later, I found myself thinking again about the story's two main characters, and probably more specifically about the male character, the other aspects of his life, his

background, and so on.

At first, I accepted this simply as ideas for a new story, but I was writing something else at the time and didn't want my brain too crowded. Sometimes, when I don't act on an idea within a reasonable span of time it can turn cold and become less of a thing for me, but this one just wouldn't let go and stayed with me as an insinuation for weeks. And finally, just to clear my head, I started to think it through. And I began to realise that the story "Goodbye, My Coney Island Baby", was actually part of something bigger, and that the characters weren't yet finished with me. So, very slowly, I began to explore the idea of expanding the story into something more.

And that's where I am now. The novel, to all intents and purposes, is finished, but the ending needs further work. I've spend several months at a time working on it, breaking it down, cutting passages and even chapters, rewriting intensively. And I am determined to finish it as soon as possible. I'd set myself a target of the year's end, but I'm not sure now that I'll make it by then. I am easily distracted. In the past year or so I've also finished three new short stories, and I have thoughts for at least a couple more that I really want to write. But it's the novel that's dominating my thoughts. The problem is that I don't trust myself at novel-length. Actually, I don't have that much trust in myself at short story-length either, but at least this is getting slowly better. I've always lacked confidence, and every new story is like starting all over again, but at least with a short story, the whole thing fits in my head. From the start I can see the ending and the sides. Or if I can't then at least I know that they won't be too far out of sight.

A novel is an entirely different beast. I have approached it in the only way I know how: by treating it as another short story. At this stage, I have a good sense of all the pieces, and I know where they go, I know the characters and I know how I want the book to sound and feel. But, most of the time, the scale makes it overwhelming. Language is extremely important to me, and so I've been focusing on this aspect, really trying to make the sentences shine, because the story's plot, such as it is, has been locked down for a long time. But in truth, I have no idea if the novel is any good or not, or even if it will be published. A few people, whose opinions I value, have read sections and loved them, and I excerpted parts of one chapter and reworked it into a short story that was published recently in a journal called the *Hawaii Pacific Review*–it can be read online, if anyone is interested. But nothing is guaranteed. On the down-days, when I start to feel a bit hopeless, I cling to the line in a Townes Van Zandt song "living's mostly wasting time", and I tell myself that I am as well off wasting time

on this as on anything else. You have to love what you are doing, though, because it's easy to get discouraged. Unless you are very lucky, you're going to take a lot of knocks. But while acceptances and rejections matter, and seeing the work published, what really matters is the story, and getting it right. That's the approach I try to take.

When I included the story, "Goodbye, My Coney Island Baby" in the collection, I'd already finished several drafts of the novel. I wanted the story in the collection because it felt as if it needed to be, and I thought it would be good for people to refer back to it if and when the novel does come out. But I'm starting to worry now that it will also present me with some problems, not least because I'd like, if at all possible, to re-use the title. But we'll see. Those are worries for another day, and at the moment my only objective is to get it finished.

Thank you very much Billy! I wish you the best of luck with your future prospects.

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Notes

[1] The research carried out for the writing of this article has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy (MINECO, research project FFI2011-23941).

[2] See Charles Oliver (1999, 322).

[3] In the poem of the same title, "No man is an Island–Meditation XVII".